

FLYING LESS: REDUCING ACADEMIA'S CARBON FOOTPRINT

Cultural Anthropologists Are Helping to Build the Low-Carbon Path

Posted on April 17, 2018 by usfoodpolicy.

By Joseph Nevins

An exciting, low-carbon academic conference will begin in a few days. Organized by the Society for Cultural Anthropology (<https://culanth.org/pages/about-the-society>) (SCA), a section of the American Anthropological Association (<http://www.americananthro.org/>) (AAA), the title (and theme) of the biennial meeting is Displacements. These include, according to the conference website (<https://displacements.jhu.edu/displacements/>), “episodes of profound political upheaval, intensified crises of migration and expulsion, the disturbing specter of climatic and environmental instability, countless virtual shadows cast over the here and now by ubiquitous media technologies.”

Scheduled to take place April 19-21, #Displace18 is the first time that the biennial meeting will be a virtual gathering. “Air travel is one of the fastest growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, and one of the chief ways that an academic livelihood contributes to carbon pollution,” the SCA explains. “We are exploring the virtual conference format with the ideal of carbon-neutral activity in mind.”

According to Jerome Whittington (<https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/faculty/jerome-whittington.html>), a visiting professor of anthropology at New York University, the no-flying conference emerges not only out of climate change concerns, ones related to a marked increase in interest in ecological matters among cultural anthropologists over the last decade or so. It also grows out of a new generation of cultural anthropologists eager to experiment with alternative ways of interacting and disseminating knowledge and ideas like open source and new media formats.

Before it has even begun, #Displace18, a conference co-sponsored by the Society for Visual Anthropology (<http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/>), has already succeeded, it seems. As of this writing, there are 48 local nodes around the world (<https://displacements.jhu.edu/nodes/>) where attendees and participants in the conference will gather “to watch portions of the conference together, and in many cases host their own workshops, dialogues, and local events.” The locations range from Addis Ababa, Bangalore, Cartagena, and Seattle to Copenhagen, Lima, Montreal, and Quetzaltenango. According to Whittington, the geographical diversity of participants constitutes a marked increase over previous, in-person SCA meetings. And with over 330 registrants thus far, the number of participants has also grown considerably.

Beyond the Displacements gathering, Whittington points to the need for the SCA to engage its members in serious, far-reaching discussions—ones that he is charged with helping to organize and facilitate in his role as the SCA’s “Climate Liaison.” While there have been no formal or published critiques within anthropology levied against the decision to hold a no-flying meeting, some have suggested that such efforts are misplaced, that they do not make much of a difference in the fight against climate change. There are also questions of how virtual conferencing will impact informal benefits that in-person

meetings allow for—for example, by allowing scholars who come from historically marginalized communities, or scholars who are at small, geographically isolated institutions to connect with people who share their concerns, struggles, and experiences. It is for such reasons plus the hope that #Displace18 is only a first step, Whittington says, that the SCA needs to “get it right” in developing the appropriate, low-carbon tools. This requires extensive consultation and negotiation among anthropologists, as well as experimentation and flexibility.

A key goal is to engage to the AAA regarding its yearly meeting, one [Jason Hickel](https://www.gold.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/hickel-jason/) (<https://www.gold.ac.uk/anthropology/staff/hickel-jason/>), an anthropologist at Goldsmith, University of London, recently characterized as “an enormous carbon bomb.” The international annual conference involves several thousand people, each of whom, [Hickel estimates](https://anthrodendum.org/2018/01/13/climate-change-ethics-code-end-aaa-annual-meeting/) (<https://anthrodendum.org/2018/01/13/climate-change-ethics-code-end-aaa-annual-meeting/>), travels “about 3,000 miles round trip, emitting 900 kgs of CO2 per person in the process.” (The SCA is engaging in a rigorous carbon footprint analysis of Displacements.) This, he argues, is “nothing short of carbon colonialism, shot through with violent disparities of race, class, and geography.” It is also, he writes, contrary to the AAA’s own code of ethics, which states: “Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety of the people with whom they work.”

It is inspiring to see the members of the Society of Cultural Anthropology taking this code to heart, and helping to push the discipline of anthropology in a low-carbon, ecologically just direction.

Registration (<https://displacements.jhu.edu/register/>) for the conference is open to all. The fee is \$10. Go to: <https://displacements.jhu.edu/register/> (<https://displacements.jhu.edu/register/>)



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